

Diary of an HR Manager

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Day 1 – “Sorry, what was your name again?”

My boss, based in Hong Kong, has made a special trip for my first day. After five interviews (including a conference call with three Vice-Presidents (VP) in Boston at two am in the morning) I’m to be the first Australia/New Zealand (ANZ) HR manager for this funky US telecommunications company. Current staff of 60 which I know is to grow to 180 in the first year. After 12 years in Telstra I’m excited.

Everyone is so young but apparently, at 39, I’m an excellent fit. I have a desk – “We get you office later,” my Chinese boss assures me. There is a laptop already opened on my desk.

The office tour is next – three floors and 40 employees. Several people make appointments to see me as soon as we meet. Seems as if there could be some meaty HR issues in this place. The company’s been in Australia for three years and my boss has been the only HR presence in all of Asia Pacific (APAC) since the start. Managers and employees seem genuinely excited that I’m here.

Fortunately, my temporary “office” is next to a small conference room so I have a place to take clients for confidential consultations. The first day, though, I spend there with my boss as she explains the structure of the company globally and, more specifically, APAC. Sales terminology, quotas, commissions and a bewildering array of products jump out from every page of an enormous folder she has prepared for me earlier. We work hard – three hours straight with no smoke break.

I have lunch with the Finance group – a good move as HR and Finance invariably work closely together (or at least attempt to). We go Asian and I meet the team – all women, their manager being a west coast blonde who towers above the rest of them. No booze – this is getting serious!

After lunch it’s back to the conference room for more induction. My boss sets the agenda for my first three months: new employee induction process, recruitment and performance management. Network with corporate HR in Boston and San Jose and work closely with the Sales Director ANZ and the VP Customer Service APAC. Luckily, both these guys are in the Sydney office although the Sales Director isn’t due to start for three weeks.

Day 2 – On my own.

My boss has flown out overnight so I'm left to fight my own battles. My email is already working so I send out a message introducing myself. Emails flood in from the US, welcoming me to the global HR team from people with exotic titles such as Director Human Capital and VP People Strategy and Compliance. I don't know what they do but they sound important so I humbly thank them for their welcome and say I'm looking forward to working with them in the future. I never do nor do I hear from them ever again!

A phone rings. It takes me a few seconds to realize it's mine. It's the training manager who wants me to talk to one of his staff who has a personal problem. I'm thrilled – this is my big opportunity. Turns out it's not as involved as I was hoping. I spend 15 minutes making up advice on the run. She seems satisfied and soon stops crying. I'm making some headway. These first meetings are vital for future credibility. I hope she spreads the word!

My boss calls from Hong Kong – she's only just touched down and is keen to see how I'm coping without her. She wants me to call the new Sales Director to sort out a few issues with his package.

I manage to get my hands on a salary spreadsheet. I soon realize I'm one of the lowest paid in the management team, although my package is more than I was getting at Telstra. The money these guys earn – it takes my breath away. Meanwhile, a steady stream of people come to see me. Our discussions invariably cover the following three topics: their horrible boss, how poorly they are paid and their lazy colleagues who are paid more than they are.

I'm exhausted by the end of it all but I've got more of the same tomorrow.

Day 3 – Quoting Sir Humphrey.

Speak to the Sales Director. He wants to know if we'll salary-sacrifice his road tolls. "My previous company used to do it", he says. The number of times we've all heard that! I, of course, have no idea whether we do that sort of thing so I put him off with a placatory "let me see what I can do and get back to you". I am to use this expression often over the next few months.

I have 37 emails to read. At Telstra a big day meant five new emails. Everybody seems to want information from me, catching up on three years of silence. My boss warns me (by email) that I can expect to receive at least 50 emails a day. She's happy because they're no longer going to her. Her prediction turns out to be spot on. She also wants me to "cc" her on all the emails I send, at least for the first few weeks. I ignore this request – the last thing I want is to have her breathing down my neck every second of the day. One of the attractions of the job was that she was located in Hong Kong.

I call the Sales Director back. “Sorry, we can’t do the toll thing. We have no provision for it”, I say, quoting the Finance Manager. He’s unimpressed, as though his financial planning strategy has been damaged beyond repair. I sympathise by giving him a glimmer of hope that maybe, sometime soon, “in the fullness of time”, our financial systems will be able to cope with his request. As usual, HR takes the rap for what is a financially controlled function. I’ve always thought payroll should be managed by HR so I make a note to discuss this with Madame Finance. I think I know what she’s going to say.

Day 4 – Introducing “corporate disobedience”.

Thursday and I’m exhausted. Have just come off a two hour conference call from home which started at five am. First opportunity to speak to the Global HR team. Apparently, we’re rolling out a new performance appraisal system called “Priorities”. My priority right now is to get some sleep but I have a morning meeting with the Customer Service Management team. I’ve met most of them before but this will be my first real opportunity to impress. Trouble is, I can’t think of anything interesting to say. I fall back on the “Oh, it’s great to be here I’m very excited about the challenges ahead” spiel I rehearsed for my first day but didn’t use. I mention Priorities and sense a collective groan from the group. I know how they feel – corporate performance management systems are usually disastrous for managers and employees. I’m yet to see someone emerge smiling from a performance appraisal meeting. I tell them not to worry – by the time I’ve tailored the process to suit our local requirements... The VP gives me a quizzical look. Mmm...I may need to do some work here to bring him round to my way of thinking. I’m a proponent of what I term “corporate disobedience” – if a corporate initiative isn’t right for my part of the business I say so and lobby to change it. I was told the company likes risk-takers!

I now have 64 unread emails and 30 others needing my attention. I ask the IT guy to set me up to dial in from home. I can see many hours of extra work ahead but I’m too busy with people to attend to these administrative tasks during the day.

Day 5 – Drinks and pizza.

Meet with the previous Sales Director who has moved into an APAC marketing role. I find out that he and the VP Customer Service didn’t get on, to the extent that one of them had to go. I sense non-work related issues at play here. My instincts prove correct in the months ahead.

My boss doesn’t seem to have noticed that I’m not “ccing” her on my emails, or maybe she thinks I’m not sending any. Have first teleconference with APAC HR team – Singapore, China and my boss in Hong Kong. We’re all new to the company so everyone is excited. The talk soon turns to changing the world (or at least some of the HR practices in the company!).

Drinks are on in the boardroom after work. I make a mental note to spend some time schmoozing the Finance Manager. Meanwhile, a sales rep has failed to meet his quota for three consecutive quarters. He has to go and I have to move quickly to get the paperwork done and tee up the meeting. Needless to say, there is no record of any previous meetings with this employee so it could get messy. I've never done this before – in Telstra I almost sacked somebody but they escaped with a redundancy package instead. This meeting goes well – the employee already has another job with our major competitor so we accept his resignation and that ends the matter.

Five o'clock comes around. Armed with a decent red I work the room. They're a great bunch of people – young, eager and overpaid. Someone suggests dinner so we kick on to the local pizza place. Luckily for me, the Finance Manager joins us. It's midnight by the time I get her to agree to my master plan for payroll.